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Good Grammar, Shame about the Style!

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Introduction

When we consider the conventions of good academic essay writing, formal lexis, Standard English grammar and a coherent structure usually come to mind, arguably hallmarks of good academic style. This article, however, considers style from a different perspective. The perspective in question involves the academic writing of EFL students which, despite syntactically competent sentences (i.e. correct in terms of Standard English), may come across as vague, inappropriate or simply unnatural sounding, certainly to the ears of a native English speaker. This is due to EFL students using words in the wrong context, or coining expressions that come across as very unusual, despite the fact that the syntax is correct. Although correct English grammar is important for essay writing, correct grammar does not always lead to appropriate communication; this in turn is argued to be an example of inappropriate style within academic writing. Therefore, this discussion focuses on improving EFL students' *communicative competence* within their academic essay writing, using samples of students' writing from the summer 2007 pre-session course here at Manchester Metropolitan University. The goal, then, is to help EFL students become more aware of the importance of context as the means to select the most appropriate lexis for their essays, in conjunction with not losing focus of course of the importance of correct syntax.

Communicative competence and the contextual factors within have long been recognized, dating back to the research of Hymes (1972), with Jung (2002, p. 1) more recently stating that,

“.....communicating effectively and efficiently in any given language requires more than just linguistic knowledge. The ability to use this linguistic knowledge *appropriately* (my emphasis) in the given sociocultural context is also essential.”

Furthermore, Yu (2006, p. 1) states that students “have to internalize sociolinguistic rules that can guide them in the choice of *appropriate* (my emphasis) forms”, leading to sociolinguistic competence. This suggests that more than just grammar has to be considered: students must also consider the right words for the context in which they are communicating (i.e. writing an essay), and in doing so, use ‘appropriate’ language. For example, the hypothetical construction of *the bitch is in heat* displays correct syntax and, provided it is used within the context of describing a female dog or wolf in one’s essay (presumably written within a

zoology department), it is perfectly acceptable from a socio-pragmatic point of view. If used in a derogatory way to describe women, however, then it is entirely unacceptable within academic writing, perfect syntax notwithstanding.

The importance of drawing EFL students' attention to contextual factors within their English, spoken or written, is nothing ground breaking. As Omaggio Hadley (1993, p. 125) points out, "the idea that language learning should be contextualized is certainly not new in language teaching", adding that "most educators agree today that students must eventually know how to use the language forms they have learned in authentic communication situations" (ibid). Nonetheless, it is argued that many EFL students have focused on grammar in their childhood English education (certainly true for Korean and Japanese students), to the detriment of subsequently learning how to *use* English appropriately.

Communicative Problems in Writing

Consider the sentence below. Though the grammar is correct, can we actually know with certainty *the meaning* of the sentence?

The environment in this place of living is generally difficult to acknowledge.

While the sentence above seems to be saying that there are difficulties involved with life (possibly the meaning of *environment*) in 'this place of living' (wherever/whatever it may be), it is difficult to know exactly what the writer's point is. For example, the word 'environment' often refers of course to the natural world, such as trees, flowers and air. If this is the intended meaning, then it is a little confusing why an environment would be 'difficult to acknowledge', as it is usually obvious what the quality or condition of an environment is (e.g. clean, healthy, polluted). If the word is being used metaphorically (e.g. *the environment in my home was always tense*), then it is still difficult to understand why something that is presumably obvious is hard to acknowledge. This raises several questions, such as the obvious *why is it difficult to acknowledge?* How does an individual 'acknowledge' an environment anyway? Furthermore, 'place of living' is arguably a somewhat old-fashioned expression, in most, if not all, contexts.

Therefore, the overall sentence meaning is not clear, *even though the grammar is*, demonstrating that perfect grammar does not always lead to clear meaning, and having clear meaning in an essay is of course a very important consideration. If the intended meaning is not clearly stated, the reader will be left guessing as to what the writer is trying to say, and a reader should never have to guess. It is of course acknowledged that the constructed example above is divorced from the full context of an essay, and full contextual information and knowledge is essential in order to truly

understand what is being communicated in an essay. However, it is suggested that the example above might still come across as unnatural sounding, even within a complete essay.

The sentence below is arguably a more clear way to communicate:

The surroundings in my student flat are difficult to deal with.

There is now little doubt what the writer means. The reasons why the flat's surroundings are difficult to deal with are not given, but they presumably will be given in the sentences that follow. Nonetheless, the sentence largely makes sense even on its own, separated from the full context of the essay to which it belongs; the same cannot be said for the first sentence, however. In fact, it isn't too difficult to make guesses about why the flat's surroundings are difficult to deal with based on general knowledge – perhaps the flat is too small, too old, nothing works properly or there are noisy neighbours. It can be therefore seen how the bolded words in the original sentence have clearer counterparts:

The **environment** in this **place of living** is generally difficult to **acknowledge** =

The *surroundings* in my *student flat* are difficult to *deal with*.

The point to make here is that *the right words must be used in the right context*. Below is another example of using a word in the wrong context. In this case, however, the meaning is clear and there is no vagueness or ambiguity at all; the problem now is that an unintended meaning is created instead:

I fondled my cat.

This is a simple sentence with perfect grammar, but it has an unusual meaning, because 'fondle' can have a sexual connotation, or at the very least, sound much less natural than the word 'stroked', as in *I stroked my cat*, which would be the expected sentence, one which describes the action in a more usual manner, and therefore sounds perfectly natural. From this example we can also see that *clear meaning does not always equate to intended, or appropriate, meaning*.

A third type of stylistic problem occurs when writers attempt to create phrases or expressions which are not used in English, or at the very least, would sound strange to most 'native ears'. An example is seen below:

There is a kind of minority food in the world today.

'Minority food' suggests, fairly clearly at least, a kind of food which few people choose to eat (liver perhaps?). However, this is

arguably an unusual way to communicate. While an individual native English speaker can not presume to speak for all native English speakers, it is appropriate to generalise to an extent. And generally speaking, *minority food* sounds unnatural and may even be mistaken by a native English speaker as some kind of jargon used in a specific field of study (which to the best of my knowledge, it is not). In this instance, perhaps 'spelling it out' for the reader would be preferred, such as the following:

There is a kind of food which few people in the world choose to eat nowadays.

Presumably, the essay will soon make it clear exactly what food is eaten by few people in the world today. For the moment, however, the sentence above is clear in meaning.

I have now identified three categories of sentence in which perfect grammar is not enough to create perfect style. To summarise, these three categories are as follows:

1. The writer uses words in the wrong context, which can sometimes, but not always, lead to vagueness and/or cause confusion for the reader.
2. The writer uses words in the wrong context, which does *not* lead to vagueness and/or cause confusion for the reader, but leads to an unintended, perhaps inappropriate meaning instead.
3. The writer creates an expression or phrase (consciously or not) which is arguably unheard of in the English language and even if the meaning is clear, the phrase itself sounds unnatural.

What now follows are examples of EFL students' writing which demonstrate grammatically competent sentences, or at least parts of sentences, which nonetheless fall into one of the three categories above. The shared factor is once again that EFL students are using grammar correctly but the resulting expression does not demonstrate appropriate style for academic essay writing.

It needs to be pointed out that for the students' writing samples which follow, several suggestions are offered in terms of words or expressions which are argued to be more appropriate. However, there are many alternative words/expressions which could work equally well, if not better. Therefore, there are many 'right' answers which can solve the problem of inappropriate style in writing; the solutions offered are simply suggestions.

Samples of Students' Essays: Category One

-the arts give children a unique means of expression, *catching* their passions and emotions.....

Though *catching their passions and emotions* is understandable, passions and emotions are not typically described as being caught, even allowing for metaphorical expressions. Instead, more common expressions might include the following:

releasing their passions and emotions.....
stimulating their passions and emotions.....

- There was no appropriate channel for women to *release* their complaints.

Complaints are not usually described as being released, though perhaps it is not inconceivable to describe them as such. We could say, for example, that *the public's complaints were released on parliament*, which would suggest that the government was suddenly inundated with complaints about their various policies. However, in the context above, regarding the lack of social rights for women, *voice their complaints* is more contextually appropriate.

- Because of *the fixed idea*, it was very hard to get rid of the inequality of the relationship.....

The *fixed idea* refers to commonly held beliefs in society regarding the role of women, mostly raising children and taking care of the home. However, the word *idea* generally means an innovation, such as *I have an idea for how to improve profits*. However, the societal mindset regarding the role of women was not an idea, but a belief. Therefore, *because of the fixed beliefs* sounds more accurate, though *because of the set ideas* is a way that the word *ideas* could be used in a more natural sounding context. This illustrates the ways in which context must be considered sometimes from the narrowest of analyses, as *set ideas* is a common expression, whereas *fixed ideas*, at least as used in the context above, sounds less natural, perhaps because it is more common in informal spoken English (e.g. *that bloke has some really fixed ideas about life*).

-*collaborations were made which surpass the feelings of gratitude to its current people*.

The sentence above derives from an essay written about the changes in Manchester since the 1996 IRA bomb attack, such as the rebuilding and redevelopment. On one level, the style is actually quite good and academic in tone, making use of formal lexis. However, this is done at the expense of clarity. It could be that the student is simply trying to say that *the people of Manchester are grateful for the joint efforts made to rebuild the city*. Sometimes, less is more.

-*everything* needs a good system to make something great.

This is from the final sentence in an essay which discusses the financial benefits of the cotton industry in Manchester and also refers briefly to how the student's country, Thailand, could use its natural resources to benefit its citizens. There is, therefore, a great deal of discussion in the essay about ways in which the citizens of a country can benefit from a good handling of the country's resources. However, *a good system* is vague and refers to many things: government, economy, education and so on. Furthermore, *everything* and *something* are themselves vague, simply because of their broad nature. The student needs to choose narrower, more specific words, so that the reader is left in no doubt and does not have to 'fill in the blanks', as it were. A better sentence might be*every government needs a good economical system to make life great* (though the word 'great' is arguably a bit informal; perhaps a better word might be 'enjoyable').

-a *barrier-free* city.....

The expression above in the broad context of an essay about changes in Manchester since 1996 even caused the lecturer to write *what do you mean?* in the margin. The student was writing about the changes made to the landscape of the city and the restructuring since the IRA bomb blast took place. A barrier-free city would suggest that Manchester is actually less protected since the attack, and has no barriers (e.g. protection measures) so as to shield itself against possible future attacks and criminal activity. Another plausible meaning, however, is that due to all the reconstruction work, Manchester is now more open-planned, with additional space created and new buildings added. However, this meaning is not adequately implied with the expression *barrier-free*. Therefore, the expression is not completely appropriate, not least of which because the first possible meaning offered is not entirely compatible with the essay's subject, which deals in part with the aftermath of a terrorist attack in Manchester.

- Undoubtedly, the Urbis has become one of the most popular museums in Britain for these *substantial dimensions*.

The student is referring to the features of the Urbis, such as its unique architecture and interactive games. However, she refers to such as 'substantial dimensions', which is very vague and could possibly refer to the size of something, such as *the dimensions of the hotel are vast*. However, as she is referring to both the internal and external features of the Urbis, a more concrete and specific expression is needed, such as *wonderful features, amazing attributes* or *unique aspects*.

-in each area there is some information about the animals such as *the living area*, number and if they are in danger or not.

Referring to the area in which animals live as *the living area* is a bit vague and ultimately is not used to discuss animals' homes in the wild. Instead, *habitat* would be the appropriate word choice.

-those fashions are normally accepted *in practical use*.

The student is finishing an essay which focused on, in part at least, modern day fashion. In the extract above, *those fashions* refers to examples of such, ranging from jeans to suits. The way the sentence is constructed seems to be overly complicated, though *in practical use* could suggest that the clothes referred to are used for everyday wear. Therefore, a simpler, and clearer, way to communicate could include*those fashions are normally worn in everyday life*.

-we should never forget to *deeply influence* other living things and their environments.

Having discussed mankind's impact on the environment, specifically how human beings affect other living creatures, the student is trying to make the reader aware of the ways in which our living can hurt, or support, that of others. She is therefore warning us that we should be careful and consider our actions, as they do impact on others. She advocates, for example, trying to reduce our household waste and practice recycling. However, *deeply influence* is broad and subsequently vague in meaning, begging the question *how should we deeply influence other living things?* The writer is advocating that we must treat other living things and their environment with respect, and this can be communicated more clearly with an expression such as*we should never forget to treat other living things and their environment with concern and respect*. Alternatively, the student could also have written *we should never forget that our lifestyle affects other living things and their environment*.

Samples of Students' Essays: Category Two

- It started in 1986 with *classic* bar prices.

To describe bar prices as *classic* suggests cheaper prices which would be expected in the 1980s when compared with the present day. Though *classic* is used to refer to past times and styles, this is more so the case when describing words such as *cars*, *houses*,

suits, haircuts and so on, but not the prices of drinks in a bar. In fact, as used above, the word *classic* might be interpreted as modifying *bar*, not prices; in this case, a *classic bar* might be an appropriate expression, suggestive of the old style bars seen in the 1950s perhaps. There really is no single word which can communicate what the writer wishes to say, however, regarding *classic prices*, and as such, the better choice might be to have to write more in order to explain more, such as *it started in 1986 with bar prices which were much cheaper back then*.

- The *issue* in the museum is inimitable.

The student is describing a collection of photographs and pictures in the Urbis, which depict city life around the world. However, describing such as an issue suggests that the museum has some kind of problem (e.g. *the issue with this museum is a lack of funding*). Therefore, we need a different word/expression here, and *the photo gallery in the museum is quite inimitable* would be a fitting solution.

-the government tends to buy *gadgets* for the country which sometimes is unnecessary.

Gadgets refers to mechanical instruments of some kind, though it could be a word used in general for any kind of tool, such as *hand me that square gadget so I can fix the leaky sink*. Here, its use is confusing for the reader because it begs the question *what kind of gadgets*? It could suggest that the government is buying mechanical tools and devices for its population; clearly, this is not the case. The writer unfortunately never made it clear, however, even within the full context of her essay exactly what she meant.

- When I *stepped into* this triangular *architecture*, I saw an information desk near the entrance.....

'To step into architecture' is both vague and specific. It is vague because the word *architecture* is itself vague; the use of this word causes the reader to ask *what kind of architecture*? Gothic? Classical? However, the overall sentence is also specific in that the phrasal verb *stepped into* suggests quite clearly that the writer stepped into a building, though this is physically impossible as we can only *walk into* buildings. However, this would also involve an unintended meaning, unless the writer means that he/she walked face first into the wall of a building. Clearly, the writer intended to explain *when I entered this triangular building*,.....

- Actually, the damage cost more than £400 million to repair, and 670 businesses and traders were *dislodged*.

Following the IRA terrorist attack on Manchester in 1996, many businesses indeed were destroyed. Though *to dislodge* means to disturb or move, businesses are never referred to as being *disturbed*. On the other hand, businesses can indeed move, but only in the context of moving at the owner's discretion, not being *forced* to move because of a bomb blast. Generally, a common usage of dislodge refers to food being removed (dislodged) from teeth by a dentist. Ultimately, the writer's intended meaning is *670 businesses and traders were displaced*, as this word has the added meaning of being forced to move, and then not from a landlord or financial hardship necessarily, but due to freak circumstances, such as natural disaster or here, a terrorist attack.

- Consequently, the construction of a railway between Liverpool and Manchester was *erected*.

Buildings are erected, and generally, all kinds of architecture, more so high rises, such as apartment blocks and skyscrapers. However, a railway, which is of course not vertical, is not erected, so the meaning above is confusing: we cannot erect a horizontal construction. Instead, a more suitable expression would be*was built or was established*.

-in most developing countries most tableware was made from polyester or plastic which can not be *dissolved* in a short time.....

We wouldn't normally think of plastic and polyester as being dissolvable, and in the context of an essay written about pollution and the environment, a more accurate way to communicate would be to say*in most developing countries most tableware was made from polyester or plastic which are non bio-degradable*.

-its decoration and furniture are both quite *harmonic* with the historical information related to the scientists.

Referring to the interior design of a museum as being *harmonic* with the historical information within, suggests that the student is trying to say that, for whatever reason, the design and the content of the museum *complement each other*. *Harmonic* refers to music for the most part, though the student could also have written*its decoration and furniture are in harmony with the historical information related to the scientists*.

-the *horror* of pregnancy.....

The words above also derive from the essay on the subject of the previous limited roles of women in society. Though life was much harder for women a hundred years ago, *the horror of pregnancy*

sounds quite hyperbolic, and hyperbole is not usually regarded as good style for academic writing. Moreover, from the full context of the student's essay, it is not pregnancy *per se* that is the intended referent, but *child bearing* instead. Child bearing in the 21st century can still be painful, but *horror* still sounds arguably overly emotional. Better expressions might have been *the dangers involved with child bearing*, or *the possibility of death in child bearing*.

- The university *arranges* many museums to help us know more about Manchester history.

The intended meaning above is that *the university arranges visits to many museums to help us know more about Manchester history*. However, by missing out this integral word, the meaning of the sentence is now akin to the university is personally responsible for the building/construction of museums, and then for the sole purpose of the EFL students at MMU. Clearly, this is not the meaning intended.

- We eagerly hope to leave more green spaces for ourselves and *the offspring*.

In the concluding sentence within an essay focusing on the need for environmental protection, the sentence above communicates something quite specific, in part because of the use of the definite article. Moreover, *offspring* is of course a formal word which refers to one's children, or even baby animals. The intended referent in the essay is indeed human children but *the offspring* would logically refer to the offspring of someone specific, who is probably known to both writer and reader, as the use of the definite article might lead a reader to ask *whose offspring?* A more suitable expression, and one that would give the intended meaning, would be *future generations* or simply, *our offspring*.

- Buddha is one of the *best* religious leaders.

Describing Buddha as one the best religious leaders is clear in meaning, and fits well within an essay about life after death and religious and socio-cultural attitudes toward such. However, it is arguably an unusual word choice, as it can suggest many things but none really appropriate perhaps for religious figures, in which a degree of humility is appropriate, even when referring to them. In other words, we might describe football teams as being the best, a favourite restaurant as being the best or even describe a teacher as the best; such use of the superlative is appropriate when describing such referents. When discussing a religious figure, however, perhaps a 'softer' word choice sounds better, such as *Buddha is*

one of the most influential religious leaders; Buddha is one of the most famous religious leaders; Buddha is one of the most well known religious leaders.

-it is easier for them to learn in *a good mood*.

The sentence above is referring to some of the interactive games and mind teasers designed for children, which can be found in the Museum of Science and Industry. However, the sentence's meaning is that children are put into a good mood, as opposed to a bad mood, when using these games. This may be the case, but a more natural expression might be *it is easier for them to learn if their minds are engaged or it is easier for them to learn if they're having fun*.

- I have become more *understanding* about historical life.

The student wrote the sentence above after having visited another of Manchester's museums. The intended meaning is that she has learned a lot about historical life from her visit. However, at face value, the sentence implies that prior to her museum visit, the student had little regard or respect for historical life. This is not the meaning the student intended, however, and a more appropriate manner of communication would have been *I have learned a great deal about historical life or I have become more knowledgeable about historical life*.

-the Industrial Revolution changed women's *pride*.

Once again, we have a sentence where the student's intended meaning is not to be found. The intended meaning is that the Industrial Revolution was in part a catalyst for the women's right movement. However, the sentence implies that women's pride *per se* was affected by the Industrial Revolution, though it doesn't say *how*. The writer's intended meaning, based on the full context of the essay, is that the Industrial Revolution, because it led to a series of events which helped paved the way for women's rights, helped to change women's role in society (and thus, indirectly at least, helped them to feel more proud of themselves for their struggle for equality). Therefore, a more accurate sentence might be *the Industrial Revolution helped to change the status of women, and in doing so, allowed them to regain pride in themselves*. Granted, the suggested sentence is a bit wordy (though it is by no means the only possible revision); however, better to be wordy and accurate in meaning, than succinct and unclear.

- Actually most people could not afford to buy electrical appliances so they only had *wire* for lighting.

To use *wire* in the context above would be confusing, as most readers would arguably think of a piece of wire, which logic dictates cannot provide lighting, and it is unclear, except perhaps to an electrician, exactly how wire can contribute to lighting in any way. Based on this knowledge, and even despite having read the entire essay, it is still unclear exactly what the student had in mind.

- In this essay, I tried to write *headlines* about my visit.

The word *headlines* refers only to the main news item in newspapers, so to use the word headlines in the context of an essay suggests that the student is treating the details of his visit to a museum as worthy of news. This was not the case of course, as the student simply wanted to discuss the various aspects of his visit, which in the context of an academic essay would best be described as *topics*.

- It looked so gigantic that I felt a little bit *pressured*.

At face value, the student's sentence implies that he felt stress of some kind at the sight of a Tyrannosaurus Rex skeleton in the Manchester Museum; this is not the case. Rather, adjectives which would more accurately describe his feelings at the sight of such a large beast could include *intimidated*, *awed*, *shocked* or even *frightened*.

- I've never seen such a beautiful tower; it really *shocked* my heart.

Describing the Urbis as *beautiful* is a fitting adjective; however, to say that one's heart is shocked at the sight of something beautiful contradicts oneself, as it describes something quite negative. A better overall expression might be *my heart missed/skipped a beat*, or simply, *it really surprised me*.

- We can *permeate* the photos to see the pretty Manchester.

To permeate something means *to saturate*; however, we wouldn't say *the towels were permeated*; instead, we would say *the towels were saturated* or *soaked*. Likewise, if people are caught in rain they might say *I am drenched*, but not *I am permeated*. Therefore, *permeate* has a fairly narrow use, usually referring to water which soaks through rocks (therefore, its use is common within the geology department). It is even more semantically confusing, then, to use this word when referring to an object which is not usually thought of as coming into contact with water (except in the narrow context of developing photos in a dark room, though even then we wouldn't use the words *drench*, *soak* or *permeate*, as the water is part of the development process, not intended to cause

damage). Therefore, having described in her essay the beautiful pictures that exist of Manchester in the Urbis, it is still unclear what the student meant by the sentence directly above.

Samples of Students' Essays: Category Three

- Manchester is *a big mix culture city*.

The expression above is to the best of my knowledge a coined expression, one that is not used in English, whereas more natural expressions exist, such as *Manchester is a multicultural city*. The use of quotation marks around coined expressions, however, can serve to signal that the writer is aware that he/she is creating a new expression. Indeed, Ivanic (1998:141) says that "writers can use inverted commas to signal ownership". For example, another student referred to the Manchester Museum as a "do not miss" place. This, however, is arguably more natural sounding, in part because we often use the expression *do not miss* when referring to items of interest, such as *do not miss this new film!* Therefore, to use *do not miss* as a modifying adjective with the noun *place* allows for a coined expression to sound natural, as part of it retains an expression which is already commonly used in English. However, even with the use of quotation marks, it would arguably not help to disguise the fact that *big mix culture city* is somewhat unnatural and awkward sounding. While creating one's own personal ways in which to express oneself can indeed lead to innovative ways to communicate, such expressions should not sound contrived, which the expression above arguably does.

- For example, the improvement of animation can completely visualise *the unreal world*.

The student was trying to say that computer graphics as used for animation can create a world of fantasy, in which the only limit is one's imagination. However, *the unreal world* would suggest a world both specific (based on use of the definite article), yet vague (*unreal world* could conjure up many images in people's minds). Instead, by replacing *the* with *a*, and replacing *unreal* with *fantasy*, the student would have clearer communication, as in *the improvement of animation can completely visualise a fantasy world*.

- I want to introduce the background and *the life environment* of the people in Manchester.

The life environment sounds interesting perhaps, but it is an expression which is likely to cause a degree of confusion among native speakers, even leading them to ask, ‘do you mean ‘*the living conditions?*’ Such would sound more natural, though perhaps a bit *too* narrow in meaning, referring mainly to the quality of housing and social services. However, the student was actually referring to ‘the life of Mancunians *in general*’ and therefore, *the life of the people in Manchester* is both simpler in style, and clearer in meaning.

- We believe that after people die, they need to use money in *the Western Paradise* as well.

The student had explained that as she is from Taiwan, she thought there was a need to distinguish the Western concept of life after death from that of the Buddhist concept, within an essay written on the subject of life after death. However, from a Western point of view, to the religious and non religious alike, *heaven* is the term which is generally used. Though *paradise* is generally used for religious people *per se*, *Western Paradise* is really not a concept heard of, unless it is a term used in the Far East. In such a case, the student is using a term which is native to her language but not to English.

-*DIY machine*.

The student was trying to describe a machine in the Museum of Science and Industry, which makes badges for individuals. Therefore, *DIY machine* might have seemed like a good expression, as the student’s way to explain that essentially, you make your own badge and therefore, it is a kind of ‘do it yourself badge making’. However, *DIY machine* might also suggest a machine that is built by oneself. To be honest, there simply might not be a specified expression to describe a badge making machine and therefore, native students alike may have to choose their words carefully when trying to describe such a device. A suggested expression which works better is the obvious, yet clear, *badge making machine*.

-I would like to use a special light to beam on the streets; sometimes it could use *a special logo light* on them.

Even within the full context of the student’s essay, the excerpt above is still confusing. The student is writing about an exhibit in the Urbis, in which the streets of Manchester are replicated using wool. This then leads into a sudden discussion of how the student would want to use *a special light to beam on the streets*; what is meant by *a special light* is unclear. Moreover, *logo light* suggests a light which shines a brand name logo on the city, such as the Nike

symbol. In this respect, her expression does not lead to confusion *per se*, but as the expression is, to the best of my knowledge, unheard of in English (at least not used in a general context), it can lead to the reader being a bit unsure of the writer's intended meaning. In situations such as this, it is up to the writer to make his/her meaning clear, even if that requires writing more and/or giving examples of what he/she means; if this is accomplished, then the reader will share the same information as the writer. For example, consider the following:

..... sometimes it could use a special logo light on them, referring to a light which could project the logo from a famous name brand onto the street, such as the Nike logo.

- I also had *creativity about the future* in my mind.

Having been inspired by a museum visit, the expression above seems to make the student's feelings clear. However, the italicised expression is somewhat awkward sounding and could be communicated in a more simple manner. As the student is essentially saying that she felt inspired about her future plans, perhaps the following are better choices:

I also had some *creative ideas about my future*.

I also had some *new ideas for my career* in mind.

Conclusion

Based on the examples presented here, which are taken from the academic writing of several EFL students, it is hopefully seen that in order to develop communicative competence in writing, EFL students need to be aware of more than just *grammatical competence*. They must also be aware of the importance of context, which is arguably the main determining factor when deciding what is or is not 'good' academic writing, which involves more than simply formal words and coherent essay structure. At a much narrower level, good academic writing (or any other kind for that matter) involves choosing the right words to express the desired meaning, and very often, EFL students have problems in this area.

I acknowledge that having offered merely a few examples, the analysis may seem somewhat lacking. On the other hand, to inundate staff or students with a plethora of examples would be overwhelming. The truth is that no amount of examples can ever suffice in the first instance, due to the nature of the linguistic issue under investigation. Specifically, considering the fact that the problem essentially involves EFL students' misuse of words, we might then consider the sheer number of words in the English

language and this in turn helps us to realise the staggering number of possibilities of using words in the wrong context.

Therefore, this discussion has ultimately sought to make students aware of this stylistic issue, in the hope that they might in turn consider their lexical and phrasal expressions with added care.

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